
Growing out of the author’s dissertation project at the University of Bielefeld and originally published in its acclaimed German version as Juden und andere Breslauer, van Rahden’s monograph examines the contested question of the extent and limits of Jewish integration in modern German society in Breslau (today Wrocław, Poland), the major city of Silesia. This is a primarily social historical, thoroughly argumentative study that draws on diverse printed and archival sources and presents its abundant findings in the form of a highly accessible text. Van Rahden analyzes several concrete aspects of the process of integration, namely social structure, private and public socializing, the school system, and city politics. Moreover, while much of the book deals with the bourgeoisie and bourgeois men in particular, important gender aspects are properly highlighted and reflections on lower-class Jews are included as well.

Drawing on recent discussions on multiculturalism and showing the possibilities of historical writing cognizant of diversity and difference, van Rahden’s Jews and Other Germans uses an approach still far from common. The author employs “situational ethnicity” as one of his key concepts, whereby he directly addresses the relations, interactions, and at least partially negotiated coexistence of Jews and other Germans. Thus, he takes on the formidable challenge of writing Jewish, German-Jewish, and German history all at once, as opposed to reproducing the normative image of the homogeneous nation-state. This ambitious and potentially fruitful approach implies that he distances himself from both explanatory models that narrowly focus on anti-Semitism or paint an idealized image of German-Jewish symbiosis, and texts that employ key concepts such as ethnicity or assimilation in overly facile ways. Importantly, van Rahden also speaks out against the institutional “re-ghettoization” of Jewish history writing in Germany (291, footnote 38).

Taking situational ethnicity seriously seems especially apt for studying the life of Jews in Breslau, since this urban Jewish group was relatively open, its boundaries fluid, and the forms of their inclusion and exclusion rather diffuse (8). What is more, the city of Breslau fulfilled a number of other prerequisites to serve as a space for “experiments of the acceptance of difference,” namely the relatively high proportion of Jews (between four and eight percent in the period under examination) who possessed a well-established bourgeois group and published several self-confident organs, the local dominance of left-liberalism, as well as the presence of at least partly welcoming non-Jewish groups (13). The five rich empirical studies of the book aim to support the main claim that high levels of integration and a dense web of relations based on mutual acceptance existed in Breslau until 1914; Jews and others were not only remarkably close to each other, but Jews could participate in municipal life with equal rights without denying their Jewishness (13–14). Thus, van Rahden critiques mainstream Jewish assimilationist as well as nationalist conceptions of Jewish integration that tend to offer similar historical narratives, even if they evaluate it in diametrically opposite ways.

In his analysis of social structure, in addition to a presentation of occupational profile, the author focuses on income structure. He uses income structure as a means of further specification as it enables him to devote appropriate attention to the major differences between petite bourgeoisie and the Bürgertum, as well as the proportion and role of single women. These specifications ultimately allow him to offer a corrective, namely to show that notions concerning the majority of Jews being bourgeois have been based on conceptual imprecision, despite the fact that
differences between the occupational profiles of Jews, Protestants, and Catholics were enormous and rather stable (merchants and, more generally, individuals belonging to the group of self-employed being much more frequent among Jews), and that Jews on average paid much higher taxes attesting to their relative wealth (28, 33, 55). His analysis of income stratification reveals highly heterogeneous, unequal conditions among Jews, and makes clear that poverty tended to have a “female face” (31, 47). Even so, it remains true that “within the Breslau bourgeoisie, Jews were a core group, not a small minority,” making up between one-fourth and one-third of the entire Breslau bourgeoisie group during the imperial era (38, 63).

Van Rahden devotes separate chapters to private and public socializing, examining the historical reality of Jews as a status group through their participation in various associations, and analyzing marriage patterns, including the intriguing case of the societal meaning of intermarriages. Treating the former issue, he shows that in the heyday of associational life, the majority of Breslau Jews could be active in both Jewish and general associations. In fact, by the turn of the century, when their involvement peaked, seventy percent of Jewish club members belonged to “mixed” clubs (68, 90). Although they were excluded from some conservative Breslau associations, and their presence triggered debates in others (polarization turning rather vehement around 1890), Jews could assume disproportionate and even leading roles in several major associations, such as the Humboldt-Verein für Volksbildung. Yet, van Rahden stresses that the overall results were rather mixed since there was a high degree of inclusion coupled with the maintenance of residual social distancing and a general lack of formation of intimate friendships (92–93).

In his analyses of marriage patterns, the author shows that at the beginning of the era intermarriage was more common among the lower-middle and lower classes. Such class differences were particularly marked among women. Furthermore, intermarrying women tended to be more independent, older, and on average closer in age to their husbands (100–102). As the number of intermarriages increased fourfold in the course of the imperial era, a phenomenon partly related to the birth of the “new (or modern) woman,” intermarriages came to resemble intramarriages more and more (114). Van Rahden’s study of wedding witnesses as part of this chapter is imaginative and useful. Yet his presentation of the utter normality of intermarriages (i.e., few related conversions and few divorces) might have profited from checking a number of other indicators, for instance, the number of children born of such marriages, as Viktor Karády has found remarkably low numbers of offspring from such marriages in the case of Hungary (1997, 238).

The author’s study of education has two aims: (1) to show the direct relations between Jewish overrepresentation in schools and the social structure of Breslau, and (2) to present two major conflicts over educational policy, namely over the founding of an interdenominational school based on parity (a goal partially achieved after prolonged struggle that lasted from 1865 till 1872), and the hiring of Jewish teachers in elementary schools (fought with even less success between 1904 and 1911). On the first point, van Rahden finds that Catholics were more overrepresented in school, if the impact of social structure is neutralized. However, he also mentions that Jews tended to frequent the four elite high schools of Breslau—in fact 84 percent of them earned their Abitur at one of these, while only 16 percent of the Catholics did (126, 131). While his method of neutralizing the effects of class is sound, Breslau as a test case for Jewish overschooling may not be the best, given that Breslau schools were among the most socially exclusive in Prussia, and the profession and income of parents mattered above all (130, 133). One could test whether Jews from lower and lower-middle classes invested more in the education of their children (which would be visible also in their performances at schools) than people belonging to